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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the highly decentralized Nordic model of distance education at the university level, which involves giving responsibility for carrying out distance education to the individual university departments. Meeting at the university and using the telephone are primary contact methods. The report includes a discussion of higher education in Sweden, distance education in the Nordic countries, basic ideas behind distance education at Swedish universities, the scope and general organization of distance education, and experimental activities. The results of an evaluation of distance education courses at the Swedish universities are also discussed, as well as the advantages and drawbacks of the decentralized model used in Sweden and Australia. Sixty-six references are listed. Graphs show growth in courses and the distribution of subjects from 1973-1984; regions covered by individual universities and colleges in 1977; distribution of subjects by university area; and distribution of the most frequent subject groups: arts, administration and economics; languages; and behavioral, computer and natural sciences. (Author/LMM)

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CONDITIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN SWEDEN AND THE OTHER NORDIC COUNTRIES

Birgitta Willén

Paper presented to a seminar in Lahtis, Finland
September 1983.

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AUTHOR ABSTRACT

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Abstract: Distance education at university level in the nordic countries is organized in a very different way from, forexample, the Open University in the United Kingdom. The nordic model is highley decentralized. The responsibility for carrying out distance education rests with the individual university departments. In this model the contact between student and teacher is central. Meeting at the university and the telephone have been the main methods of establishing contact. Distance education is regarded as a supplementary form of study parallel to evening classes and local external courses.

The report describes also the scope and general organisation of distance education at the swedish universities since the start 1972 to 1983/84. The activities have expanded rapidley.

The main findings from the evaluation study of the distance education courses at the swedish universities include a very high degree of satisfaction among the participants and the study results were suprisingly high. This was despite the fact that the majority of the participants kept a full-time job in adition to their studies.

Paper presented at: a seminar in Lahtis, Finland september 1983.

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1. Higher education in Sweden

During the last two decades, adult education in Sweden has expanded rapidly. Behind this expansion lie several political initiatives (Prop 1967:85, Prop 1975:23) partly based on the ideal of equality in the field of education (see also Coleman et al 1966, Coleman 1973). During recent years, the compulsory school system has been extended so that, compared to before, everyone has a relatively long basic education. The investment in adult education is partly to provide older generations with the possibility of educating themselves and of supplementing the schooling they received as children. Financial resources have been increased generously. This has led to an increase in the number of participants in adult education and also to several changes in the form of education. In recent years, an important educational goal in Sweden has been to increase accessibility to higher education, making recurrent education available even for employed adults living out of reach of the university towns. Part-time evening classes, decentralized university education and distance education are some of the means of achieving this goal (Dahllöf, Kim & Willén 1978). Therefore the ages of the university students are relatively high. Even though there has long been an adult element in higher education, mainly in the Faculties of Arts and Science and then often compulsory schoolteachers seeking to improve their qualifications, adult students now constitute a new large group. If the aim of recurrent education is fulfilled, this group will provide a considerable flow of students to higher education for many years to come.

A major portion of Swedish undergraduate education is organized into about 100 general study programs established by Parliament. These programs vary in length from 1 to 5 1/2 years. Also, each general study program consists of courses which themselves vary in length. There are also local study programs, which are aimed at local needs and conditions.

Separate single-subject courses are short-cycle study programs designed mainly to meet the need for further education or advanced professional training. Each university decides which courses to offer.

The scope of a given study program is measured using a point system. One point is equivalent to one week of full-time study and 40 points add up to one academic year.

The organization of distance education at university level in Sweden is very different from, for example, the Open University in the United Kingdom (Harry 1981, 1982), which operates according to a central model and makes use of broadcasting (Willén 1975, 1981). The Swedish model is highly decentralized. The responsibility for carrying out distance education rests with the individual university departments, which at the same time organize other forms of university education (see Fig 1).

Student at the university	Student not at the university
- Ordinary day-studies (full degree programs)	- Decentralized university courses (part-time)
- Separate single-subject-courses (full-time/part-time)	- University study circles (part-time)
- Evening classes (part-time)	- Distance education (part-time)
	- Commissioned education

Figure 1: The study-program, which can be offered by a department at a Swedish university.

In essence, Sweden's system has many similarities with the long tradition in Australia (Dahllöf 1977, White 1982). The Swedish model makes use of the existing universities, which in comparison with their British counterparts, have long been relatively open. Distance edcuation is regarded as a supplementary form of study parallel to evening classes and local external courses.

2. Distance education in the Nordic countries

In the Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, there has been an expanded offer of distance courses during the last few years. Finland started first in 1972, Sweden in 1973, Norway in 1975 and Denmark in 1982 (Willén 1983).

In an international perspective it is confusing and extremely interesting to find that the Nordic countries have choosen the same basic model for distance education, a decentralized one, independently of each other.

When discussing distance education at university level with people from these countries it seems clear that there is a similarity in values and understanding about the nature and realization of higher education.

There are of course also similarities between these countries in geographical, demographical, economical, historical and political ways.

But I will also point out that there are variations between the Nordic countries, and that they seem to make a difference in the the distance model both in a quantitative and qualitative way, but whithout changing the basic structure. Take as an example Norway and Sweden and you will find out that Sweden has a much larger number of distance courses than Norway, where the number of distance courses has almost not expanded at all. I think the explanation is at least twofold. In Norway they have their district colleges, which gives a lot of people the possibility to study.

Furthermore, in Norway the inhabitants are not spread out over the country in the same way as in Sweden. So it is easy to see that the need of distance courses can be lower in Norway than in Sweden.

The rules for admission to the university are also very different in these four countries. In Sweden almost the whole university has opened its doors for the adult students, which means that they during their study time are not dependent of only one study form. In other Nordic countries there are different admission rules for distance courses compared to the "traditional" university education.

However, the differencies treated above between the Nordic countries have not given rise to any important differences in the basic models for distance education at the level of higher education.

3. The basic ideas behind distance education at Swedish universities.

Distance education at the Swedish universities began in the academic year 1973-74. Before experimental activities were commenced, certain quidelines were issued by UKÄ (1973):

"The exact form of the experimental activities will depend on the particular provisions that can be made by the participating educational establishments and institutions. It is, however, possible to give some general indications as to how the intended experimental activities may be planned and organized. These include:

- a drastic reduction in the amount of oral teaching (compared with traditional university teaching);
- a concentration of oral teaching on shorter, clearly defined, periods;
- that participants will mainly pursue their studies individually at home;
- that one or more methods will be tested to bridge the physical distance between students and teacher (during periods without oral teaching);
- that the educational establishments assume the responsibility for organizing and implementing instruction: (UKÄ 1973, p. 1).

Perhaps I should point out that there were different motives for starting distance education and two other projects proposed by U68. These motives have varied from time to time. Then U68 first proposed the experimental activity in 1968, means were being sought to relieve the pressure on the universities caused by a large increase in the intake of students over the previous years (SCB 1974a, b). When distance education started in 1973, the situation was reversed. The intake of students had decreased rapidly and many departments had enormous problems with surplus capacity (UKÄ 1970, 1971, 1972). One of the burning questions became how to recruit new students groups. It is possible that distance education would not have met with the same enthusiasm on the part of the departments, had the problem of declining student numbers not existed.

Concomitant with the experimental activities with distance education in Sweden, the Committee for Television and Radio in Education (the TRU-committee) was given the task of proposing general models for the organization of distance education in Sweden. A special working-group was appointed, which after reviewing international experience, put forward a number of models varying in the amount of central administration (SOU 1975:72). Dahllöf (1976, 1977; Dahllöf & Willén 1981) has pointed out that the description of the international scene given by the working-group, is characterized by an obvious information bias in favour of a system based on radio and television. I should like to point out that the working-group of the TRU-Committee did

not themselves speak in favour of any particular one of the suggested models.

4. The scope and general organization of distance education

The main pedagogical idea behind the experimental activities with distance education was to test different methods of teaching students, who can come to the educational establishment for short periods only. It was a question of finding pedagogical methods which allow instruction and studies to function at a distance from the university. The universities were intended to implement distance education. They were responsible for subject content and the customary planning of courses, as well as creating and using special methods for distance education.

The courses are offered at a "slow pace", which means that one semester's standard course is offered over two semesters.

The distance program is based mainly on self-studies as are traditional university studies in general. It is important to know that the same textbooks are used as in the ordinary university courses and that the same examinations are held both with regard to form and content. Supplementary material consists mainly of written study guides and assignments which are sent in to the university at regular intervals.

In order to overcome distance and to increase teacher-student contact, residental schools, the telephone service and audio-cassettes are used.

The telephone service consists of the head teacher or the tutor setting aside certain hours of the week when students can make a short call. The teacher then calls back at the expense of the university.

The experimental activities with distance education were initiated in the autumn term of 1973 with seven courses. Thereafter, the activities expanded rapidly (see Fig. 2). In the last few years some study programs have also been offered. Uppsala University has also offered distance courses to Swedish people living abroad.

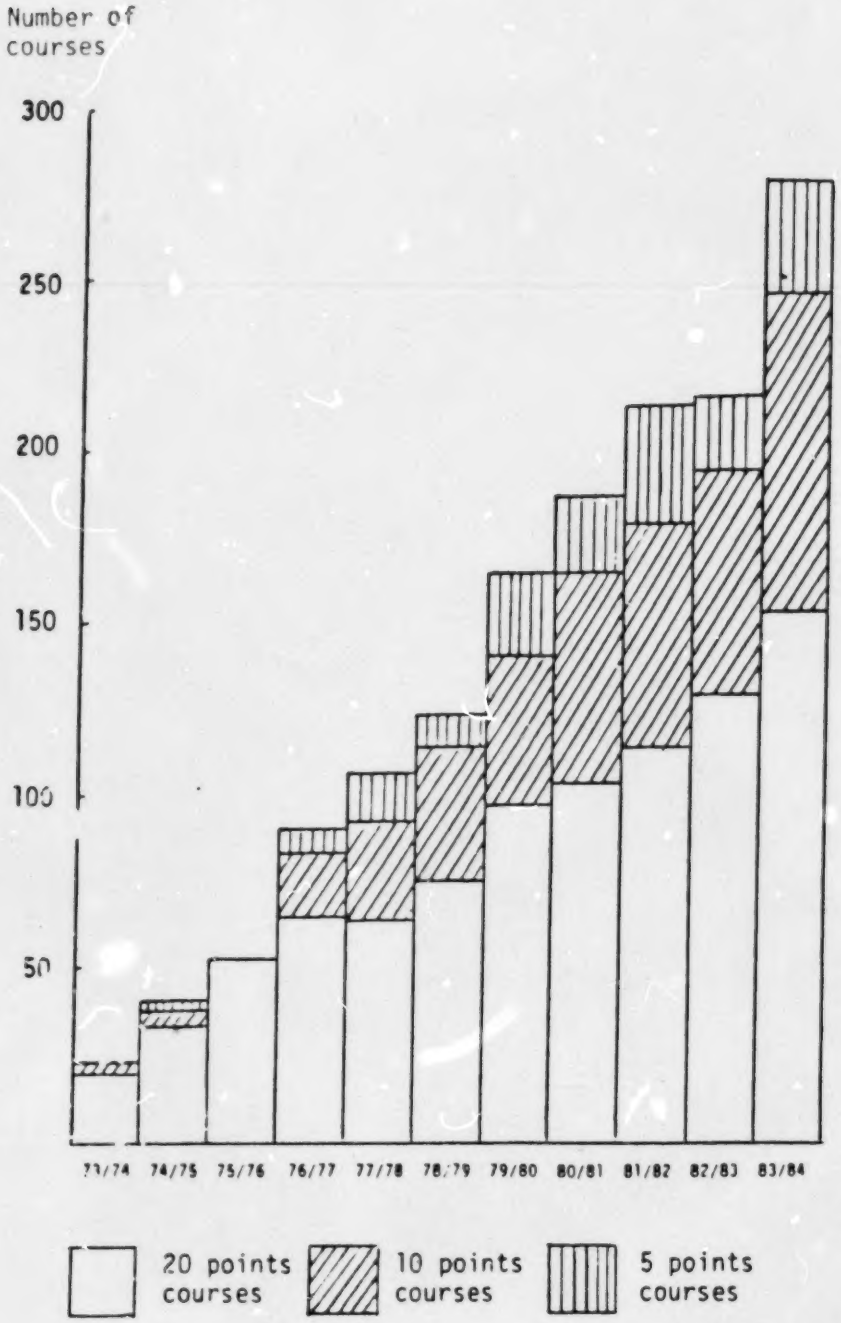

Figure 2. The distance courses offered at Swedish universities between the academic year 1973/75 and 1983/84.

The experimental activities with distance education, took place before the 1977 Reform of Higher Education, and were part of the preparations for this reform. The responsibility for higher distance education during the experimental period was in the hands of the Office of the Chancellor of the Universities but after the 1977 Reform it was transferred to the newly established six Regional Boards (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Regions of higher education, universities and colleges in Sweden 1977. (Source: Willén 1981, p. 18, Fig. 1.1).

As you can see in fig. 4 there is a great difference between the regions regarding the number of distance courses offered during the past eleven years. Umeå and Uppsala have for the whole period, offered more courses than the other universities put together and this is surely due to the fact that these two universities serve people living in the most sparsely populated areas of the country. The interest in distance education seems also to have been much higher at these universities.

Stockholm University started distance education very late, in the academic year 1979/80. They operate a special model, as most of their students come from the area around Stockholm. The distance courses at Stockholm University have usually more face-to-face meetings than those at other universities, and as a result of this the tutors report that the students do not use the telephone service as often.

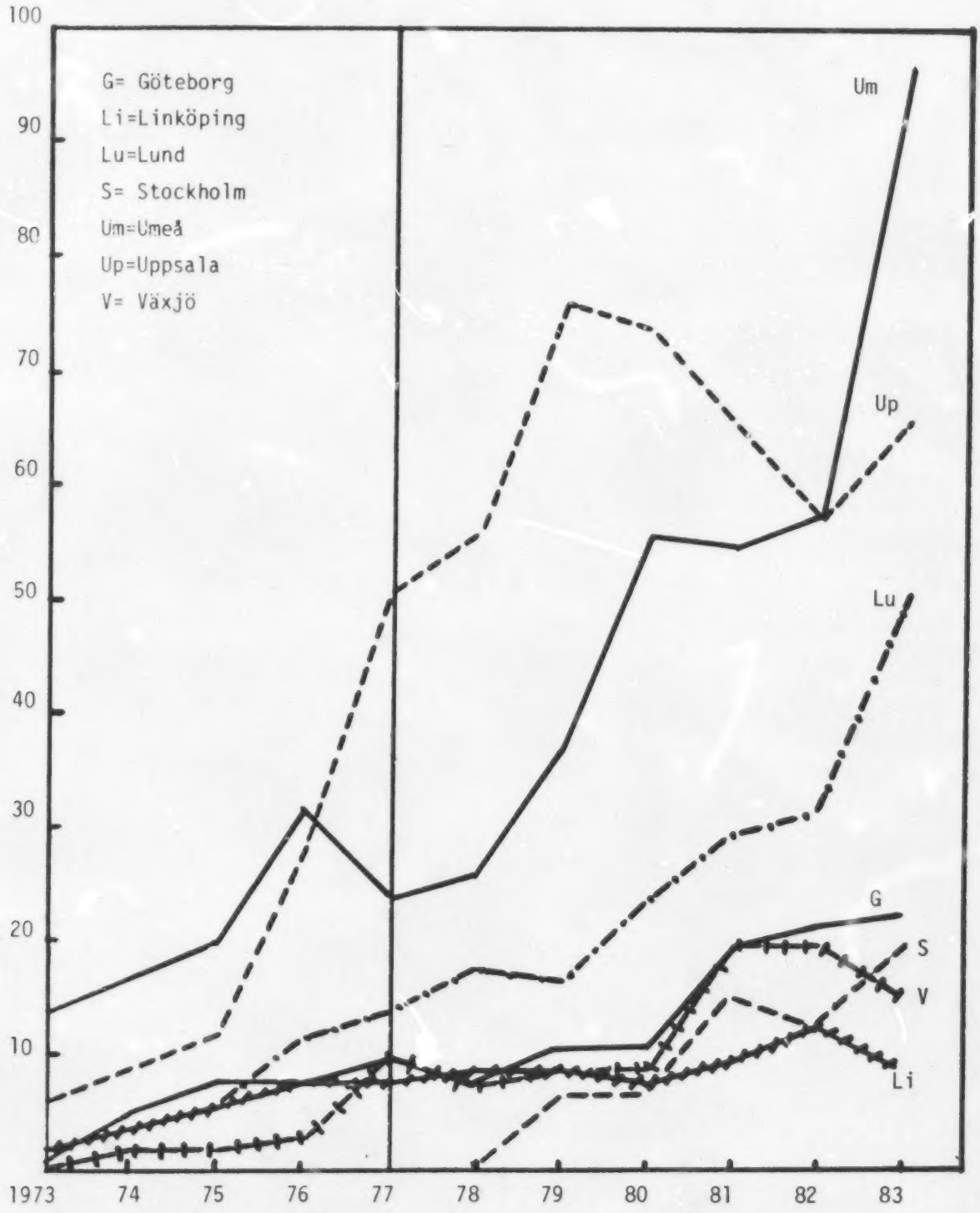

Figure 4: The distribution of subjects during the period 1973/74 to 1983/84, divided into university areas.

In figure 5 the distance courses are devided into subject groups. During the experimental period language and natural subjects were offered to a larger extent than subjects from other areas. When the Regional Boards had to decide which courses to offer the picture changed a little and social science courses became most favoured. A relatively new subject area is computer science, which started as a distance course at Uppsala University.

It should be observed that figure 5 only contains the most frequent subject groups. Distance courses are offered also in forestry, health-care, journalism, law, teacher-training, technology and theology.

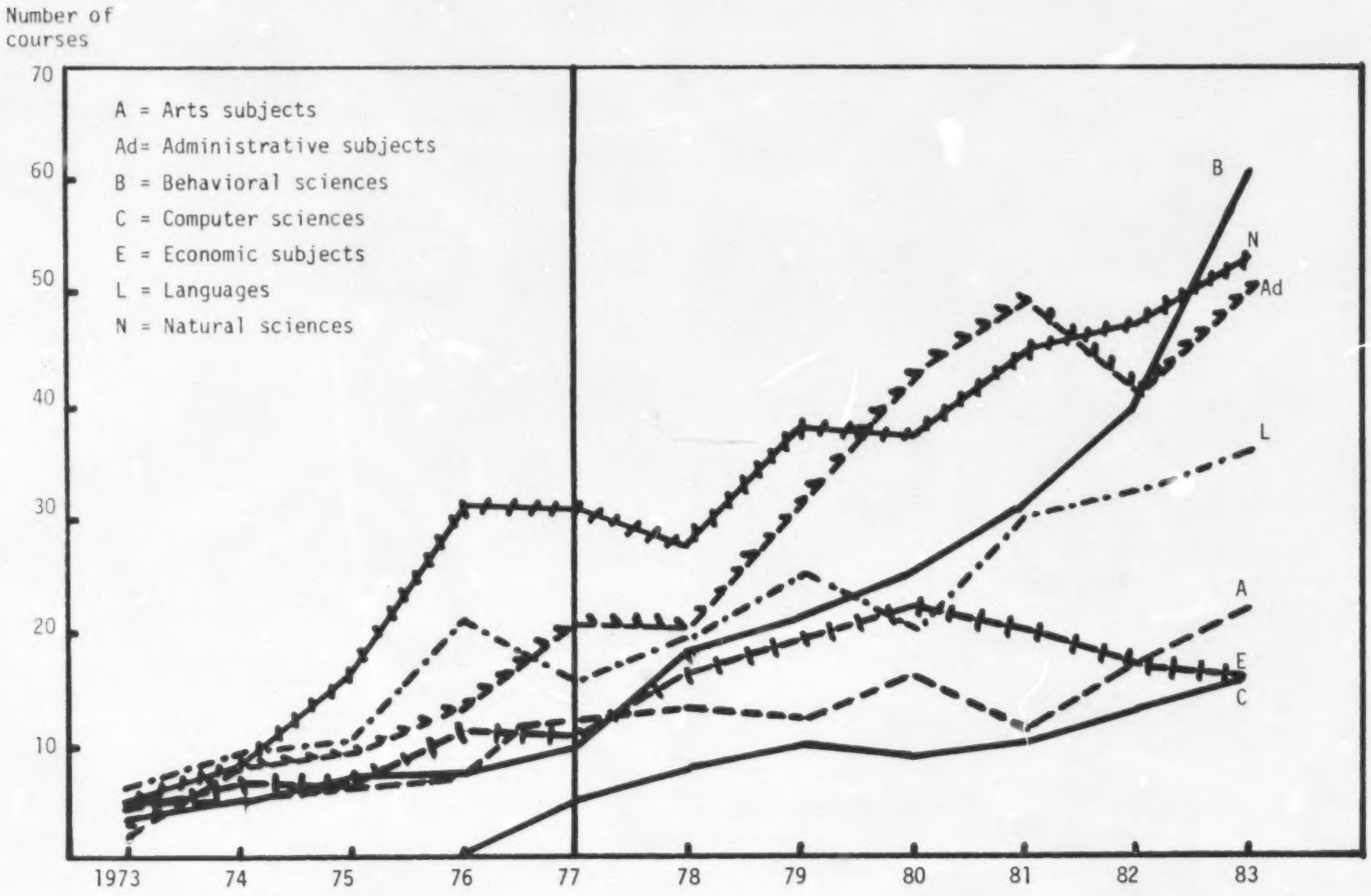

Figure 5: The distribution of the most frequent subject groups

An evaluation study of the distance education courses was undertaken for all universities and some of the results will be presented here (Willén 1978, 1981a,b).

The main findings include a very high degree of satisfaction among the participants and the study results were surprisingly high. This was despite the fact that the majority of the participants kept a full-time job in addition to their studies.

It is important to notice that more than three quarters of the students considered the meetings at the university to have been valuable. Those with less prior education appreciated the meetings more than those with a higher educational background.

One of the most important distance bridging aids was the telephone and the evaluation showed that there was a marked need for components with a "feedback" effect, such as the telephone, letters, study-circles and meetings at the university. The students were less interested in TV and radio.

5. Concluding discussion

In the evaluation study referred to above it was clear that the target group for distance education in Sweden is very heterogeneous and this is surely the same at distance education universities in other countries.

So I want to emphasize the importance of noting meaningful differences between the student sub-groups, especially when a systematic trend is obvious (cf. Zelan & Gardner 1975, Chesson & MacDonald 1978, Cross 1978).

In the current literature in this area, there is a tendancy to characterize distance students as though they were a homogenous group and this can be used to support the theory of the independent and autonomous learner (Holmberg 1980, Moore 1972, 1973, 1975, Wedemayer 1976, 1978). According to Moore, independent learning or teaching is an educational system in which the learner is autonomous, and separated from his teacher by space and time, so that communication is by print, electronic means, or some other non-human medium and the autonomous student is described as a person who knows how to proceed through each of the learning events.

The opinion that the majority of distance students are autonomous, and for this reason choose this particular form of education is not supported by

the investigations which have been carried out. On the contrary, it often proves to be practical reasons which have driven the student to choose this form of education. My evaluation also clearly shows that most of the students had no choice, as no other form of education was available in the place where they lived, or that it was impossible for them to participate in any other form of education for family or occupational reasons.

My data shows that distance students at the university do not constitute any special group compared to other adult students at the university. The extension of this discussion, suggests that it could be harmful for students if one were to hypothesize that students are autonomous learners who know to proceed through each of the learning events. Such an opinion could be misused, so that the planner and the teacher do not take the needs and capabilities of the students seriously enough when organizing education. O'Donnell & Daniel (1979) have also pointed out that the first myth about the adult student which must be dispersed is "that adults neither want or need help in setting goals, planning programs, defining objectives or sharpening learning skills. Experience, the great teacher will ensure these steps occur" (ibid, p. 6, see also Daniel & Shale 1979). Houle (1964) expressed similar thoughts as far as the problem of drop-outs was concerned, namely that many adults do not know how to learn and therefore need much help at the beginning of their studies. Many investigations show that students who choose distance education are dependent on being able to be flexible in their studies (Zelan & Gardner 1975), De Goede & Hoksbergen 1978, McIntosh 1978, McIntosh & Woodly 1978, Fenster 1979, Hall & Palolo 1979, Kaye & Rumble 1979).

I will here stress very hard upon the fact that there is a large variation in students' ability to cope with the study material (see e.g. Marton & Willén 1972) and also "that there are distinctive differences between people in terms of their subjective conceptions of learning" (Säljö 1979, p. 443, see also Marton 1979, Marton & Svensson 1982). Therefore it is very important to accept the fact that different students need different structures and different supportive measure. These measures must be set in quickly. The problem also arises at completely different points in time as the student's possibilities of studying are limited by other activities concerning e.g. work and the family (cf. Cain 1979). Kelly (1981) has found the same demand of contact among the students at the Open University in England. Thus, it is a question of the individualization of teaching and I would like to

make it clear that this need cannot be met by TV or radio programmes, however, exellent they may be (cf. Bates & Pugh 1975, Bates & Callagher 1975).

In the decentralized Swedish model the contact between student and teacher is central. Meeting at the university and the telephone have been the main methods of establishing contact. This is also the most common method e.g. in Australia (Debham 1976, Mitchell 1975, 1978, Laverty 1980) and Finland (Kirkinen 1979, Kommittérapport 1975:28, 1981:36).

The conclusions may be that effective personal counselling plays a central part in the study situation specially at university level (cf. also Northedge 1975, Simpson 1977, Lefrance 1979, 1982, O'Donnell & Daniel 1979, Bartels 1982, Säljö 1982).

However it is obvious that the decentralized model used in Sweden and Australia has certain advantages which should not be overlooked.

- The contact - feedback - between student and teacher is simple and uncomplicated.

- The student has often one teacher during the entire period of the course, whom he or she can contact by telephone or during the meetings at the university regarding all types of problems.

- The students have the possibility to choose different educational forms at the university at different points in time , and indeed, they do so.

- The distance courses are identical regarding content and pass requirements, with the courses taken by full-time regular students.

- It is cheap!

- The model provides a framework within which there are exellent possibilities of individualizing and differentiating education.

- The drop-out rate seems not to be higher then among the ordinary university students and the pass-rates are extremely good.

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